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AUTHOR Donaldson, Gordon A., Jr.; Weber, William M.
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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the site histories and summarizes the reports of the participants of the East Hartford, Connecticut, and New Hampshire voucher planning projects during 1973-76. It discusses the voucher concept, which is to give parents a direct role in education, and compares the two voucher models. A summary of four viewpoints held by participants in the experience concludes the report. The ultimate irony of these two experiences, the paper states, was that the voucher system never stimulated much interest or involvement on the part of parents. However, the projects raised many questions about public school funding, accountability, and efficiency. The document states the hope that the records of these experiences will stimulate modifications in educational delivery systems, even if education vouchers are never fully implemented or tested. (Author/LD)

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VOUCHERS IN EAST HARTFORD CONNECTICUT AND NEW HAMPSHIRE

EA 011 766

A Note to the Reader

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>
> Education Vouchers in New Hampshire: An Attempt at Free Market Educational Reform, by Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr., March 1977.

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VOUCHERS IN EAST HARTFORD CONNECTICUT AND NEW HAMPSHIRE

A SUMMARY

By Gordon A Donaldson, Jr.
and William M Weber

For the National Institute of Education
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C.M. Leinwand Associates, Inc.
430 Lexington Street
Newton, Massachusetts

May 1977

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The key to documenting the East Hartford, Connecticut, and New Hampshire voucher efforts was the remarkable openness of the participants in a politically charged and highly controversial situation.

Citizens, educators, and local project staff often answered our most difficult questions frankly and opened their file cabinets, offices, and meeting rooms to permit us to observe their day-to-day activities.

Peter Bateman, Maeve McDermott, and Don Richard of the Center for the Study of Public Policy and Ola Clarke, Denis Doyle, and Elaine Piccini of the National Institute for Education were similarly open about their activities.

Robert Cunningham, the NIE project officer who oversaw the site histories, encouraged us to produce a frank and balanced set of documents and supported us throughout.

Lisa Glaskin and Nancy Burnett, office staff at C.M. Leinwand Associates, typed the copy for the printing of this summary. Joan Fitzgerald edited the material and supervised production.

Throughout the voucher history project, from the initial observations to the printed manuscript, we encountered and worked with dozens of other people who graced us with their enthusiasm, patience, humor, and conscientiousness. We hope that this document and the site histories creditably reflect and serve as some small compensation for their contribution.

William M. Weber

William M. Weber

Gordon A. Donaldson Jr.

Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr.

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A Brief Summary

Subject:	East Hartford, Connecticut, and New Hampshire Voucher Planning Projects
Period covered:	1973-1976
Federal sponsor:	National Institute of Education
Reform proposal:	Education vouchers would make schools more responsive to parents and children.
Local outcome:	Proposals to apply for funds to implement voucher programs were rejected.
National implication:	Federal government decided not to sponsor further voucher efforts.

Introduction

In late spring, 1975, C.M. Leinwand Associates, Inc., a Newton, Massachusetts, information management firm, hired the authors of this paper as site historians for the National Institute of Education's (NIE) voucher planning projects in New Hampshire and East Hartford, Connecticut. Their task was to observe major events and record decision-making activities in the last year of the projects.

This paper provides an overview of the New Hampshire and East Hartford voucher efforts. For the reader curious about attempts at implementing voucher (or any) social theory, it offers a bird's eye view of the East Hartford and New Hampshire experiences. For the reader interested in learning briefly about education vouchers, this paper outlines their theory and practice. For the reader unsure whether to jump unprepared into the site histories, this paper offers an introduction.

The authors caution the reader that this document is necessarily brief. While it faithfully reports the organizations, theories, histories, and characters of the East Hartford and New Hampshire voucher projects, one cannot entirely understand the complexity or the logic of either site without reading the full site histories.*

*William M. Weber, History of Education Vouchers in East Hartford, Connecticut: The Parent Choice Project: February 1975 - January 1976; Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr., Education Vouchers in New Hampshire: An Attempt at Free Market Educational Reform (Both volumes are available from the National Institute of Education, School Finance and Organization Division, Washington, D.C. 20208.)

Part 1

Voucher Variations

Introduction

The education voucher concept appeared on the American education scene in the late 1960s as a scheme for reforming public schools. Advanced by several camps of social scientists and adopted by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and the National Institute for Education, the idea first received federal financial support in the early 1970s.

By the mid-seventies, East Hartford, Connecticut, and the state of New Hampshire had completed studies of the concept and had proposed operational plans to implement the program. The 1976 rejection of the voucher concept by these two sites effectively ended the attempt of the federal government to introduce the education voucher experiment to American schools.

The Voucher Concept

The education voucher concept used in program design in the New England sites was characterized by several traits:

1. Children would attend a school which they and their parents chose.
A "voucher" roughly equivalent in value to the cost of educating a student in a neighborhood public school would pay for the student's education at the chosen school.

2. A school's survival would depend on its ability to attract students since funds would follow students to schools.

Schools would compete to win vouchers by working toward the goal of parental and student satisfaction. Schools which did not attract sufficient voucher monies might need to adopt new practices to recruit students to remain economically viable. Through this competition, it was argued, school quality might rise.

3. Educational choices would expand.

In cases where no school satisfied a group of parents, enterprising educators would establish schools to attract vouchers. The programs and philosophies of existing schools might similarly diversify in an effort to attract the vouchers of special populations of children.

4. Private schools would participate.

Under the voucher system, secular and sectarian non-public schools would be tentatively included with public schools to expand choices and stimulate competition.

Historical Variations: East Hartford & New Hampshire

The development of the voucher concepts described above followed a circuitous course. Federal commitments began in 1969, when the Office of Economic Opportunity commissioned the Center for the Study of Public Policy (CSPP) to design models for implementing voucher theory and to stimulate local interest in the idea. Initially, urban school districts showed the most enthusiasm for the experiment. Only one, however, the Alum Rock Elementary School District in San Jose, California, had opted to try vouchers by 1973.*

Although suburban and rural voucher sites were not top priority for OEO's "soldiers against poverty," East Hartford and New Hampshire became the last two hopes for federal voucher proponents to see their ideas for reform translated into action. Both the New Hampshire and East Hartford voucher projects began in 1973 and ended in 1976.

In late spring of 1973, several OEO officials became concerned that the unregulated voucher model had not received sufficient attention. They asked New Hampshire Governor Meldrim Thomson to consider experimenting with the model. Amenable to the idea, Thomson involved William P. Bittenbender, Chairman of the State Board of Education. By May 1973, the Board had voted to support an unregulated voucher experiment and had received funds to begin the project.

A month later, OEO was dismantled and its Voucher Office transferred to the new National Institute for Education. However, the New Hampshire project became the responsibility of HEW's Assistant Secretary for Planning & Education. It was not

*The Alum Rock voucher demonstration was limited to public elementary schools. For a concise discussion of Alum Rock, see E. Levinson, "The Alum Rock Voucher Demonstration: Three Years of Implementation," April 1976 (available from National Institute of Education, School Finance and Organization, Washington, D.C. 20208).

until December 1973 that NIE staff assumed major responsibility for the New Hampshire project.

New Hampshire had established an office called the Education Voucher Project in the State Department of Education by January 1974, enlisted seven communities in the project by June 1974, and submitted a study and planning proposal by July 1974. The proposal established September 1975 as the beginning of an operational unregulated voucher program.

The date became entirely unrealistic. By the time new NIE funds were received, two of the seven districts had dropped out of the project. The Director of the Local Project, created in January 1975 to coordinate planning, resigned and was not replaced until four months later. In August, the study phase "ended," although its work was incomplete. The result of the subsequent planning phase was a proposal that satisfied neither local, state, nor federal requirements. In March 1976, voters in each district rejected the voucher program.

East Hartford voucher discussions had begun in 1973, following a workshop sponsored by the Center for the Study of Public Policy. East Hartford School Superintendent Eugene Diggs, who attended the workshop, believed his own attempts to introduce open enrollment and school autonomy to his system were similar to the voucher experiment then being launched in Alum Rock, California; he subsequently initiated voucher negotiations with the federal government.

A small 1974 feasibility study was followed by a planning grant awarded in 1975. A detailed account of this Parents' Choice Project from February 1975 through January 1976 is provided in the site history. On January 26, 1976, the East Hartford Board of Education voted six to two not to apply for federal funds to actually implement a voucher program. In February and March 1976, six New Hampshire voucher sites also rejected a voucher proposal.

Comparisons of the Two Voucher Models

Although both sites were funded by the National Institute of Education, their histories follow quite different paths. The differences were not so much the result of unique events and personality traits as they were the results of fundamental divergences in the conception and implementation of the voucher idea. Comparison of the two sites indicates that the voucher idea spawned multiple and sometimes contradictory implications.

Voucher Models

Voucher theory included many possible variations. Academic theoreticians as diverse as Milton Friedman and Christopher Jencks were able to define separate and often contradictory voucher models. In fact, the federally funded Center for

the Study of Public Policy officially recognized seven possible voucher models; each model, in turn, generated its own set of variations. Thus, voucher debates often focused not only on general voucher theory, but upon the particular voucher model in question.

New Hampshire's education voucher plans closely resembled CSPP's "unregulated model." Drawing from economist Milton Friedman's notions of an "educational free market," the New Hampshire model sought to maximize competition among schools for students and tuition monies. It argued that schools, as suppliers of educational services, should depend on the satisfaction of parents (educational consumers) for their very survival. The model suggested that vouchers would force schools to modify and reform their practices to make their services as effective and cost efficient as possible. A constant problem for the New Hampshire site was the inability of supporters of the unregulated model theory to agree how the model would actually work.

East Hartford's voucher model was based more on a pragmatic outlook than on theories of the economic marketplace or government regulation. Throughout the project, economic analogies would be ignored in favor of the belief that parents should have the right to choose their children's school. The site's voucher planning project was aptly named Parents' Choice.

Voucher Initiative

All variations of the voucher model stressed the importance of local initiative. Federal officials were sensitive to the problems of Washington's sponsorship of grass roots participation. This awareness made them increasingly reluctant to dictate how local school districts should implement their voucher models. As a result, "local ownership of the idea" became a key NIE phrase.

New Hampshire's politically conservative Republican leadership carried the "voucher ball" early and kept it moving through much of its history. Seven districts were originally funded; after two left the program, a new district was included. Planning activities and administrative responsibilities remained at the state level. Thus, the voucher project was never divorced from its early federal and state identification.

In East Hartford, the school superintendent was primarily responsible for introducing and sustaining the voucher concept in the primarily Democratic suburb. It was expected that the regular school system would integrate the voucher program into its standard operations, as it had other federal programs, such as Title I aid.

Site

Contrasts between urban, suburban, and rural communities were often highlighted as distinguishing characteristics of voucher sites. Most voucher activity had focused on revitalizing urban school districts. The rural (New Hampshire) and suburban (East Hartford) sites offered the possibility of assessing the voucher's potential in new, non-urban settings.

Because New Hampshire's early patronage came from state officials in Concord, much of the early publicity and planning was done without benefit of a site. It took a year simply to locate school districts willing to participate in a study of the voucher plan. Although the staff tried hard to find large districts for this purpose, none chose to join the project. Consequently, the New Hampshire voucher site originally consisted of seven small rural and suburban towns, two of which withdrew during the course of the project. Eventually, one small city also decided to participate. This necessitated a middle-level or regional administrative structure -- one which would work with several superintendents, school boards, and populations located within a forty-mile radius.

East Hartford, a town of 60,000, offered a single site with a largely middle class, suburban population. The project was to involve only the schools within East Hartford -- both the large public system and the two parochial elementary schools. The voucher planning project, known as Parents' Choice, was incorporated into the existing school system.

Growth

The impetus for education voucher reform was often viewed as a search for a remedy to the dilemmas of expanding school enrollments in recent decades. Interpretation of the "failure of vouchers" often hinged on dramatic changes in the 1970s, when school enrollments generally declined. However, southern New Hampshire's school population growth was an exception to this general trend of the 1970s. Thus, it offers a useful point of comparison to East Hartford's more typical experience of declining enrollment.

The concept of vouchers was introduced in New Hampshire and East Hartford at significantly different stages in the growth of their school systems. Southern New Hampshire's population was rapidly growing. Schools in most of the voucher districts were crowded and financially hard pressed. Consequently, educational officials saw the voucher system as a means of easing these local burdens by allowing children to attend public and private schools where space was available. Districts hoped to "voucher students out" and, thereby, to avoid financing new buildings and hiring new staff for their own school systems.

East Hartford had grown rapidly in the 1950s and early 1960s when housing developments and shopping malls were built on old tobacco fields. By the time voucher talks began in the early 1970s, East Hartford was preoccupied with declining enrollment and tight teacher markets. Subsequently, the popular mood toward educational innovation in East Hartford was cautious.

Private Schools

The fact that Alum Rock's voucher program has been limited to public elementary schools made private school inclusion in New Hampshire and East Hartford much more crucial in establishing a "true voucher test." The encouragement of private-public school competition and sectarian school participation were among the most controversial aspects of the voucher plan.

The New Hampshire parents would have been able, with minimal restrictions, to "spend" their vouchers in any public or private school within the continental United States. However, since the voucher program would pay transportation only to schools in areas contiguous with participating districts, the opportunity to exercise free choice was realistically limited to southern New Hampshire and nearby Massachusetts. Voucher advocates hoped that the program would encourage new alternatives within the participating districts. While critics feared new schools would usher in "hucksterism," proponents argued that new schools would relieve potential crowding in public schools, as well as offer the competition that would instigate improvement in all schools.

No such new school supporters were to be found in East Hartford where dwindling school population meant school officials were concerned about closing existing schools, not supporting new ones. A goal of the East Hartford voucher experiment was to keep students in the town; thus, private schools had to be located in the town in order to be eligible. This limitation introduced a new problem. Since East Hartford's only private schools were parochial schools, voucher supporters feared that the federal voucher program would be viewed as a "front" for federal parochial school aid. In its deliberations, East Hartford's Board of Education was sensitive to this consideration and the vulnerability it lent the project. Without secular private school participation, East Hartford's voucher program might not have been able to withstand a Supreme Court test of the separation of church and state.

Teacher Unions

Traditionally, both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have lobbied vigorously against voucher programs at the federal level. The unions charged that competition would foster educational hucksterism and lower public school quality; they also acknowledged that teachers in

participating districts would risk losing their positions if their schools did not attract sufficient numbers of students.

Although the New Hampshire Education Association's Executive Board unanimously rejected the voucher idea and campaigned fiercely against it in 1974, when the final votes were taken in 1976 they played little or no role. State and local lay leaders felt the voucher system would "put educators on notice" and force them to be more effective and efficient. In this regard, the union's opposition to the idea increased lay support for vouchers.

In East Hartford, a teacher union subcommittee studied the voucher issue and published a pro and con report, since members were divided on the issue. However, the East Hartford Educational Association later conducted a poll which confirmed Parents' Choice surveys: the majority of teachers opposed vouchers. Teachers' attitudes were mentioned by several members of the East Hartford Board of Education when they rejected voucher implementation.

Public Comprehension

Informing the public about vouchers was essential to both political and educational considerations. The voucher proposals would have to pass through a political process before applications for federal funds could be submitted. Voucher supporters believed that public pressure, based on an understanding of the proposals, would benefit their cause. Assuming that vouchers did pass their initial political test, it was also argued that the public would need additional information to allow them to use and benefit from the new system.

In New Hampshire, citizens of member towns never became fully acquainted with the voucher program. The Project Office, tardy in public information efforts, found that the detail of their public explanations was so confusing that their information campaign was counterproductive.

In East Hartford, extensive attempts were made to inform the Board of Education and the public about all aspects of the voucher program. The fact that the majority of townspeople did not have a sophisticated idea of vouchers was perhaps due to public apathy and suspicion of "new educational ideas" rather than project negligence.

Decision Mechanisms

Federal officials acknowledged that the fate of vouchers would be decided in the political arena rather than through a philosophical examination of the voucher concept. The method of decisionmaking was of strategic importance to voucher supporters and critics.

In New Hampshire, districts' citizenry in a town meeting forum made final budgetary and educational decisions for their schools. The District School Boards served only as standing committees for these District Meetings. In East Hartford, the nine-member Board of Education made all educational decisions, while the budget required approval by the Town Council.

Clearly, the politics of engineering a voucher vote in the two sites were shaped by the demands of "direct democracy" versus "representative democracy." In both New Hampshire and East Hartford, the voucher proposals were finally rejected, each through a different series of decisions.

The following table summarizes contrasts between New Hampshire and East Hartford voucher planning sites.

CHARACTERISTIC	NEW HAMPSHIRE	EAST HARTFORD
Model	Unregulated	Regulated
Initiative	State	Local
Site	Rural/Multi-site	Suburban/Single-site
Growth	Increasing	Declining
Private Schools	Sectarian/ Nonsectarian	Sectarian
Teacher Unions	Opposed	Opposed
Public Comprehension	Low	Low
Decision Mechanism	District Meeting	Board of Education

Part **2**

Plausible Perspectives

Everyone as Historian

« Whatever we did about vouchers (at the final vote) tonight can be explained in one way or another by what we did or did not do in the days, months, or years before. »

- East Hartford Parent

Any experience as complex and long-lived as the voucher projects in East Hartford and New Hampshire is prone to numerous and conflicting interpretations. Not surprisingly, most participants in the two sites viewed history in a way that justified their own efforts.

One popular view, observed at the local level in both sites, saw events as part of a struggle of hard-working, no-frills, common sense folk against highly financed Washington social scientists and local professionals who had no stake in the welfare of the people. Suspicions of professional manipulation dominated this perspective. Many parents with only a passing knowledge of the project thought that there were hidden motives and hints of federal irresponsibility behind "this voucher thing."

Other local people who believed in the potential benefits of a voucher program, chastised the public for not rallying behind it. The population in general, they felt, was complacent: people were too narrow-minded to understand that vouchers would enhance their own roles in the education of their children and, thus, the quality of schooling.

Project personnel in East Hartford and New Hampshire tended toward yet another view. They thought of their work as a struggle against all odds to operationalize the voucher plan. As the possibilities for success dimmed, local project personnel elaborated this "underdog history," pinning success or failure on the specific strategies and choices made by participants. Thus, the wording of a press release, the selection of a consultant, or a presentation to a parents' group took on life or death importance.

Finally, participants in Washington tended to view the experience in both sites as tragic. As the probability that the sites would return affirmative answers to Washington declined, disheartened Washington officials mused that "perhaps the whole voucher experiment was doomed to failure from the start." Although millions of dollars had been pumped into the voucher effort over six years, only one school district in the whole country had been persuaded to participate in the experiment. East Hartford and New Hampshire were the last chances to demonstrate the possibilities of the voucher concept.

Four Viewpoints

The history of the East Hartford and New Hampshire voucher efforts was deeply affected by the fact that participants' interpretations of events and positions were often in conflict. Beyond the immediate perceptions of the participants, four general themes characterized the contrasting perspectives: the Parents' Rights View; the Public Service View; the Research View; and the Anti-Federalist View.*

The Parents' Rights View

A consistent motif in pro-voucher arguments was the idea of returning rightful authority over education to parents. Vouchers, in this view, could place both the freedom to choose schooling and the responsibility for overseeing the process of schooling directly in the hands of parents. Those who viewed vouchers in this manner tended to feel that professional educators, centralized government, and community elites hold too much power over education. As CSPP originally argued, vouchers were seen as a necessary corrective to a public education system that offered children radically unequal schooling experiences. The time had come to equalize every parent's right to an active role in his child's education -- and every child's right to a quality education.

To the minority who supported vouchers for these reasons, the events of the East Hartford and New Hampshire experiences were evidence of the unwillingness of those in power to share control. In East Hartford, it was the Board of Education, school principals, and a majority of teachers who repeatedly and decisively resisted the Parents' Choice Project. In New Hampshire, local school boards, superinten-

*The four views presented here are constructs created by the authors to classify and interpret voucher activities. The viewpoints are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the "real world of vouchers," critics' and supporters' views were often ill-defined and contradictory.

dents, and teachers were, in this view, the critical and final barrier to local approval.

Disconfirming this critique to some extent, several leaders in the project shared this viewpoint. Most officials in NIE's voucher office, for example, stood behind the concept for its potential to "shake-up" the staid and unimaginative world of public education. New Hampshire's Chairman of the State Board of Education saw vouchers as an unprecedented opportunity to cut down the "monopolistic oligopolies" -- the professional educational fraternity, local school boards, and teachers' unions -- that robbed individuals of their personal rights. East Hartford's school superintendent, from the very start, made vouchers a part of his program to decentralize school organization, involve parents in schools, and expand the choice of educational programs within the district.

These important but controversial leaders, along with small numbers of parents, constituted one of the most outspoken pro-voucher forces in both sites.

The Public Service View

Improving local schools was a second major theme in participants' responses to voucher events. A shorter range, less political perspective than the Parents' Rights View, the Public Service View emphasized the possibilities of funding and attracting good students and teachers to one's school. Vouchers seemed a good idea from this perspective: they would allow schools to develop in their own distinctive directions and parents to choose more clearly compatible classrooms or schools for their children. The prospect of winning a sizeable federal grant was a significant motive underlying this view.

Those who supported vouchers on this basis explained the failure of the projects in a number of ways. Most commonly, they believed that the plan designed by voucher officials was needlessly confusing. The consultants, transportation, budgeting and evaluation designs, and administrative plans were too costly and complex, and simply unnecessary. Bureaucracy and the habit of professional educators to obfuscate took the brunt of the blame in this view. The voucher experience became, for these people, just another example of how a simple, constructive idea -- giving a parent a choice among schools and making schools accountable -- could be bungled by "professional administrators."

Some parents, some teachers, and most school board members tended to hold this view of voucher events. During 1974 particularly, when proposal writing and funding delays created a long, frustrating waiting period, local participants questioned the wisdom of "making this into such a big thing." Later, public information reports, the voucher jargon, the myriad of consultants' reports, and the complexity

of the entire program led local leaders, parents, and school personnel to wonder what had happened to the basic idea of "improving schools." Teachers and principals who looked forward to a more precisely articulated curriculum, a more compatible constituency, and more funds found the activities of "the feds," CSPP, and the project offices inefficient and off-base.

The Research View

A number of major actors in the East Hartford and New Hampshire voucher efforts were professionally interested in what these experiences could reveal about the delivery of educational services in general. The concept of education vouchers had existed for many years, yet no full-fledged effort had ever been devoted to "trying them out." East Hartford and New Hampshire were willing to "try out" vouchers with public and private school students from kindergarten through high school. In addition, they represented two different voucher models. It was said that if the voucher experiences of both sites were carefully documented and evaluated, educators could learn a great deal that could profoundly effect public and private education in the future.

Those who took an Experimental Research View focused on how the experience might be validly recorded and later replicated in other sites. To some, it was very important that a clear voucher model be followed in planning and that the logic of voucher theory govern most decisions. When politics, finances, or convenience persuaded participants to make decisions without regard for theory, those interested in voucher research grew concerned. The more the initial design for using vouchers changed in East Hartford and New Hampshire, the less interested some researchers became. However, not all research oriented participants subscribed to this experimental view.

According to the Demonstration Research View, many voucher variations were worth examining. The major problem, from this perspective, was to actually implement any one of these voucher models. Until a full-fledged voucher model was operational, it would not be clear what its real characteristics, as opposed to its theoretical possibilities, would be. It would be at this later point, according to the Demonstration supporters, that a more controlled experimental evaluation should be considered.

Assessing the merits of these competing research views is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is clear that variations of the Experimental and Demonstration Views were held at both the federal and local levels. This lack of consensus about how to implement the research did, however, hamper voucher supporters' attempts to articulate clearly and consistently the benefits of their specific proposal.

The Anti-Federalist View

Suspicion of federally initiated programs was voiced by a majority of parents and education staff in New Hampshire and East Hartford. Skepticism of NIE's "research" interest and cautions against "being bought by federal dollars" was particularly acute in New Hampshire where local people and state officials alike viewed the federal government as a careless, self-interested giant. The air of distrust toward Washington created a distance between NIE and CSPP staff and local personnel. In New Hampshire, this distance contributed to misunderstandings and hostilities. On-site staff came to see "the feds" as uninformed and insensitive, and federal staff began feeling that local staff were incompetent and petty. In this atmosphere, project staff in New Hampshire and, to a lesser extent, in East Hartford were not capable of assuring skeptical citizens of Washington's good intentions.

Oddly enough, NIE's voucher staff was cognizant of the anti-federal atmosphere and, to varying degrees, shared local abhorrence of a strong central government. The NIE strategy for developing the East Hartford and New Hampshire sites drew heavily from OEO's "grass roots" style. Federal officials consequently encouraged local "ownership" of the voucher program. However, they continued to insist on the inviolability of some aspects of their program design, such as private school participation. To state and local officials, this mixed message contributed to a belief that the federal agency "doesn't know what it wants." In addition, CSPP, which had been hired by NIE to handle much of the on-site consulting, came to be seen as "the federal agent." When NIE and CSPP did not agree or communicate successfully, it became even more difficult for local personnel to believe the federal presence was reliable and well-informed.

The anti-federalist suspicions, amplified by mistrust of post-Watergate Washington, played large roles, both in confusing the daily work of the planning offices and in defeating vouchers when votes were finally taken.

Part 3

Summary Observations

In retrospect, we feel several observations are particularly instructive for future efforts of this nature.

As participants discussed the plan, they continually rediscovered that implementing vouchers implied radically new practices in school financing, educational accountability, and parental choice and responsibility. Vouchers could realign political control over schools and the relationship between private and public education. It seemed that the voucher idea itself carried implications so pervasive and overwhelming that project staff and citizens never fully understood the total picture. Public approval was, of course, difficult to obtain in this situation.

However, some members of the voucher staffs believed the projects' mistake was revealing too much far-reaching detail. In moving from theory to implementation, they posited, one should not display the multiple possibilities of the theoretical design to the actors. One ought to operate pragmatically with the actors and await the appearance of secondary and tertiary consequences rather than predict them. This strategy had a certain appeal for voucher participants, as discussions and program design often became hopelessly bound up in attempts to plan for a seemingly endless series of consequences.

Related to the issue of "translating theory into practice" in both East Hartford and New Hampshire, were problems in matching the agendas of federal and local project staff. NIE and, to some extent, CSPP approached vouchers as an exciting

concept worth "testing" for its possible impact on expanding parental choice in education and on redressing the imbalance between public and private schooling. Federal officials did hope that as long as the local sites wanted to pursue other purposes within a broad framework of a voucher program, then most activities would be mutually complementary. East Hartford's superintendent was primarily interested in having vouchers serve his interests in decentralization and open enrollment. In New Hampshire, the Chairman of the State Board of Education saw in the voucher scheme a means to combat rising unionism and complacency in public education's professional circles. In both sites, local citizens hoped that vouchers would simply improve schools, provide wider choices, and reduce costs. However, given the communications and personal difficulties encountered in both sites, these diverse ends were perhaps impossible to serve through a single, controversial means.

Perhaps the ultimate irony of these two experiences was that vouchers, a program to bring parents a direct role in the education of their children, never stimulated much interest or involvement on the part of parents. Both site histories document how most parents were never "turned on" by the voucher concept. Those who were attracted to the idea were often later "turned off" by the administrative complexity of the voucher program and resistance to private school participation.

We do not know if vouchers per se contributed to what both project staffs termed "parent apathy." However, most parents of American public school students do feel impotent about asserting themselves with educational professionals and local politicians about any issue. From the voucher projects' perspectives, parents simply refused to seize the opportunity to participate more forcefully in their children's education.

Certainly in New Hampshire, where the voucher's fate was decided by vote of citizens themselves, parents refused the chance to give themselves new rights and responsibilities. In East Hartford, Board members said they rejected vouchers because "the people did not want it."

Finally, after much political maneuvering and many ideological confrontations at all levels of the projects, a doomsday spirit manifested itself. At the federal level, particularly, where six years of effort had produced only one active voucher site, participants continually wondered if the East Hartford and New Hampshire projects were simply destined for failure.

It is, of course, tempting to speculate on what might have happened had alternative strategies been employed. We raise this issue not to proffer our own scenario but to question those who are now saying that vouchers were doomed from the start. The fallacy of "vouchers as tragedy" thinking, as we see it, stems from the identification of the universe of possible voucher activities as the finite ones which

NIE, CSPP, and the sites happened to use. All too often, thinking in the sites seemed overly determined by the lessons learned from the federal voucher experience in large urban and mostly unsuccessful voucher planning experiences. In looking at the rejection of vouchers at the sites we observed, we cannot help wondering if the suspicion that "the voucher idea had run its course" did not contribute to NIE, CSPP, and local dispiritedness and, ultimately, to failure.

In any case, the education voucher experiences in East Hartford and New Hampshire, like those in Alum Rock and the districts that never reached a viable state, opened a broad-based discussion of public education that is unusual in itself. The projects raised many questions about public school funding, accountability, and efficiency. We hope that the records of these experiences -- here, in the site histories, and in the reports of the participants -- will stimulate modifications in educational delivery systems, even if education vouchers are never fully implemented or tested.